CHEVALIER DE SAINT-GEORGES (1745-1799)

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Violin Concertos by Black Composers of the 18th & 19th Centuries

Rachel Barton Pine | Daniel Hege | Encore Chamber Orchestra

CDR 90000 035
Say "classical music," and most people think of names like Mozart. Cedille Records want the world to know about two of Mozart's less-familiar contemporaries, Chevalier J.J.O. de Meude-Monpas and Chevalier de Saint-Georges, as well as later composers Joseph White and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. All were men of mixed African and European descent who made important contributions to European music in the 1700s and 1800s. Celebrities in their day, they've been all but forgotten in our era.
Performers are violinist Rachel Barton Pine, a celebrated performer who champions less well-known music, and Chicago's Encore Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Daniel Hege. The Center for Black Music Research at Chicago's Columbia College helped rediscover the musical compositions and locate the printed scores.

These composers of color lived colorful lives. Relatively little is known of the early background of French composer Meude-Monpas, but we do know that he was born in Paris and was a musketeer in the service of French king Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette - when he wasn't composing and writing books on music. Also active in Paris was Guadeloupe-born Saint-Georges, son of an aristocratic French plantation owner and an African slave. The dashing Saint-Georges (who graces the disc's cover) was a champion swordsman and extraordinary athlete, as well as a violin virtuoso. In 1792, he was appointed colonel and commander of an all-Black military regiment of French Caribbeans and former American slaves.

Cuba's Joseph White was born to a French businessman and an Afro-Cuban mother. A concert sensation in Europe and Latin America, White's violin playing was admired by the finest musicians of his day, including the great opera composer Gioacchino Rossini, who wrote, "The warmth of your execution, the feeling, the elegance, the brilliancy of the school to which you belong, show the qualities in you as an artist of which the French school may be proud." When White performed in the US in 1876, one music critic called him "The best violinist who has visited this country . . . "

England's Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the son of a physician from Sierra Leone and an Englishwoman, was esteemed in the US, especially among cultured African-Americans. His circle of American admirers included Booker T. Washington. The Coleridge-Taylor Society, a Black choral group, was founded in his honor in 1901. He visited the US several times and was a White House guest of President Theodore Roosevelt. His idol was famed Czech composer Antonin Dvorak, who encouraged the use of ethnic folk music, including Negro spirituals. Accordingly, Coleridge-Taylor incorporated elements of Black spirituals into many of his later works (although not the piece on this disc).

The CD booklet says the support of a European parent gave each of these mixed-race musicians access to formal educational and social opportunities unavailable to their African relations: "Excellent training and remarkable talents allowed these artists to take full advantage of a rare opening in the social fabric, yet they remained exotic and exceptional."

"What may surprise people is that you don't hear an obvious African influence in these pieces," James Ginsburg, the CD's producer, observes. "The composers approached Western music on its own terms and succeeded in creating outstanding works that show a personal imprint within the mainstream styles of their times."

Critic Reviews

Chicago College News
"In one of the bolder moves in the classical music business this past year, Barton has unveiled a treasure chest of worthy material on her new album… Ms. Barton's talent is, by now, no secret and her bow work on this album is the stuff of pre-legendary status. Her technical mastery is without question some of the best we are going to hear in our generation. When the score calls for fancy fingerwork, she has few rivals. Her crisp, enunciated delivery leaves many gasping with disbelief."

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Artistic Quality 10/10 Sound Quality
"A disc you should not miss."

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Fanfare (www.fanfarmag.com)
"Barton, Hege, and [the Encore Chamber Orchestra] deliver attractive and involving performances with a Mozartean mix of subtlety and power."

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Program Notes

From Commodity to Creator: The Search for Social Equality Through Cultural Virtuosity

Notes by Mark Clague

Scholars have identified two possible and markedly contrasting derivations for the term "concerto." Each of these has resonance for the musical and social parameters that surrounded the creation of the works on this recording. One school of thought emphasizes the contentious juxtaposition of soloist and ensemble by tracing the term to the Latin verb "concertare," meaning "to fight" or "to contend." Indeed, the concertos recorded here were and remain social weapons - tools created by their authors of mixed African and European descent to carve out a niche in a society of uncertain expectations.

Album Details

Total Time: 75:17

*World Premiere Recording(s)*

Recorded: June 3-5, 1997 at the Chapel of St. John the Beloved, Arlington Heights, Illinois
Producer: James Ginsburg
Engineer: Lawrence Rock
Production Assistant: David Dieckmann
Cover: Anonymous etching based on a painting of Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges
Design: Cheryl A Boncuore
Notes: Mark Clague
Violin: "ex-Lobkowicz" A & H Amati, Cremona, 1617

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Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799). Personal Data: Born: 25 December 1745 near Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe. Died: 10 June 1799 Paris, France. Note: [Unfortunately, this text has not yet been translated. Please refer to the German page.] Catalogue raisonné: Works sorted by Opus number (German only). 48 entries. His Times: Owing to the Abolitionist Movement and the French Revolution, France in the late 18th century was not a particularly stable place to be living. This was however where Joseph Bologne (better known as Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges) plied his trade. Whilst his father was a wealthy aristocrat he was born illegitimately to one of his father’s African slaves, and French attitudes towards race – though more progressive than other nations – still meant that he could not be considered nobility along with his father. Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (December 25, 1745 – June 10, 1799) was a champion fencer, classical composer, virtuoso violinist, and conductor of the leading symphony orchestra in Paris. Born in the French colony of Guadeloupe, he was the son of George Bologne de Saint-Georges, a wealthy married planter, and Anne dites Nanon, his wife’s African slave.